

Jackie Shave

Maggie Perrin conducting an interview for the Session Stories Project at Westminster Archives on 17th March 2023.

Jackie Shave was born in 1960 in Ilford Essex. Her parents were teachers who had met while playing the violin in the orchestra at a teachers training college. She received piano lessons from her mother when a child.

Jackie defines a session where musicians are booked to perform music that they have often not seen before and requires sight reading. This is the opposite from her concert performances. Musicians are paid by the hour for music recently written for a film, TV programme or popular music.

Music was part of the fabric of her early family life as her father enjoyed classical music but pop music would also be played. She had no serious ambitions to be a violinist but took lessons from a school music teacher at Redbridge Saturday morning music school. She found it quite easy and she had a natural ear for music. Jackie obtained a place at the Royal College of Music but gave it up after a year finding the lessons too technical before leaving to sell double-glazing!

A close friend contacted her to help perform a Shubert piece and she regained her enthusiasm for the violin before entering the Royal Academy of Music. She left early to join and lead Opera 80 who toured the country playing small theatres.

Jackie had by now built up a reputation after being a leader of the Brindisi quartet and Shubert ensemble. This led to Gavin Wright (now her husband) booking her for a session at the Hit Factory in Goodge Street. Session work was well paid and there is little preparation involved compared with rehearsing for live performances which meant that session work helped to subsidise her work with string quartets.

Jackie did point out however that there was a danger of being sucked into lucrative session work when taking on a new mortgage and acquiring higher living costs. Many session musicians then find it difficult to turn down work and are concerned that offers may not be made again if they do. Jackie was in an advantaged position as her now husband, Gavin, was also a "fixer" and understood if family life interfered with work. Indeed, she would often turn down work in order to attend to the needs of her children although the employment of an au pair helped considerably.

Jackie would sit with the other players in the string section and would find it interesting to see where the other musicians placed themselves in the studio. She normally sat at the back and found it relaxing after the rigours of touring and live work. More ambitious musicians would usually sit near the front. It was the case that some sessions could be nerve wracking when quiet sections had to be played for film music and performers then felt more under

the spotlight. At other times stress could be caused by the fact that the work might be especially boring due to the repetitive nature of some session work. This is particularly challenging for those session musicians who have high levels of technical ability.

Jackie commented on the effects this might have on some musicians who resorted to stimulants in order to deal with their workload. Her personal difficulties revolved around balancing her children's needs with last minute session bookings which included commutes into London. Nevertheless, she feels privileged to be a session musician which carries the prestige of being considered of a certain standard and requires the ability to sight-read in pressurised situations.

String session musicians rely on a diary service provided by fixers who will supply the studios with the requisite number of available musicians to form an entire string section for the booking. Of course, "word-of-mouth" recommendations exist and inevitably new talent will come into the business as other musicians retire,

Jackie described the practical issues of playing on a session. This included wearing headphones and playing to a "click-track" in a certain tempo. The information would be written on a page – e.g. 60 beats per minute. This may be very complex particularly for film music such as the Harry Potter film scores she worked on but there would be a wide variety of musical styles from session to session. Occasionally, if a solo was required the studio would provide the music in advance although this was rare. Jackie felt that more challenging music was welcomed by session musicians as it was more fun. This makes the difference between feeling fully engaged with the music and not being part of a production line. Working on themes for video games could, for example, be dull. In fact, Jackie would avoid taking on some film session work which she knew would be so mind-numbing that it would negatively impact on her live performance work. The advent of new technologies has taken away some of the creative aspect of the work as performances may be assembled after the recording of separate parts of the score. Jackie believes that the process of "stemming" where the sections of the orchestra are recorded separately takes away the spontaneity of a performance and inevitably leads to musicians playing with less passion.

However, the Bond films were great fun as she worked with brass sections and the score was lively. As a string player she, of course, usually played as part of a large section of up to 40 violins playing in unison. Jackie did refer to those sessions where she knew the composer who had also requested her to play. This helped to create a more personal connection with the work which she particularly enjoyed.

Jackie encounters the same problems as other session musicians in getting to recording studios which involves traffic issues and public transport. She allows at least two hours to make an appointment from her home in Brentford to Air and Abbey Road studios where he usually works these days. Jackie recounted a couple of occasions when she nearly lost her violin after leaving it on a train. Her instrument is extremely valuable and she owns only a part share in it.

Typical days do allow for some socialising with colleagues either for pre-session coffee or lunch. More recent recording methods using "stemming" techniques mean that the strings,

wind and brass sections are recorded separately allowing for a quiet 10 minutes reading a book. But every day is different and the life of a session musician is irregular.

Jackie believes that session players must be able to play well in time, rhythmically and in tune. Adaptability, patience and the ability to get on with other musicians are other important qualities together with not resenting constant repetition. Session musician's greatest fear is not being booked again and so availability and reliability are essential. The pressures of the of the job do lead some musicians to drink alcohol to settle their nerves but this of course can impact on performance levels.

The relationships between session musicians is generally supportive although of course there is some competitiveness as to whether you are invited back for further engagements.

Jackie observed that the backgrounds of the younger musicians in particular tend to be very middle class probably due to the cost of a music education now. Many in orchestras have been privately educated although there is something of a "laddish" culture associated with brass sections.

Because of the increased use of "click" tracks, conductors are less important now in the studio hierarchy although they can be very important in terms of setting an atmosphere. The engineer and producer will make decisions about which take is best. Some sessions are done remotely with musicians and producers from, for example, the US.

Jackie commented on the lack of women in production and engineering roles in recording studios. This also applies to the writers. However, a growing number of women musicians are now being employed and the often "sexist" culture which once existed has diminished.

Many of the recording studios in London which Jackie enjoyed playing in have now gone. One of her favourites was Olympic in Barnes which was small creating an intimate atmosphere and allowing only a small orchestra. There was a nice sound and much of the work revolved around the production of popular music. The main studio at Abbey Road is underground which results in poor air quality. However, Jackie loves Abbey Road studio 2 which has a "dry" sound but is enjoyable to play in. She finds Air Lyndhurst very pleasant because of the large windows which allow light to enter the studio which is less common in other studios where musicians feel more enclosed.

Like most session musicians, Jackie is paid by the hour. Usually payment is within a couple of days for pop music but classical work means payment after a month. The freelance nature of the work can result in a precarious financial position especially as regards pension provision. In recent years, residual payments for popular music work means that airtime in the media now results in payments for past work. She observed that many session musician's get "caught out" by their lack of retirement provision. Older musicians in the classical field may have bought instruments which have greatly appreciated in value since they were first purchased which can be an asset.

Jackie's most memorable session was working on a Joni Mitchell Album with Vince Mendoza in the box. She grew up with Joni's "Blue" album and so was particularly excited to be part

of this session. The recording of “Both Sides Now” had some musicians in tears at the beauty of the arrangements and Joni’s vocal performance.

Jackie feels privileged to have had the opportunity to be a session musician. It has allowed her to have financial security whilst pursuing creative live work with her quartets.